

HOW THE SOVIETS RAVAGED GERMAN ART

BY ELIZABETH FAGG

AMERICAN GI's in Germany tell a story about the typical Soviet soldier. Out of Russia for the first time, he was stationed in Berlin after the war's end. He had captured a German alarm clock. Excitedly, he carried his new possession to a Berlin watch repairman. Thumping it down before the astonished German, he commanded, "I want this clock cut up into four wrist-watches."

Official Soviet treatment of German art has more than resembled this soldier's way of treating a clock. In their removal of art treasures from Eastern Germany and Berlin, Russian soldiers destroyed through a kind of primitive dumbness just about as much as they carried off. Germany's wrecked museums today bear witness to Russian violence and inefficiency. From the moment Stalin's forces occupied Germany, they had made it clear that the USSR, unlike the other three occupying powers, regarded art treasures as legitimate booty of war. Soviet authorities immediately set up

in Berlin a fine arts outfit which was called — in absolute candor — "The Soviet Trophy Commission." Popularly dubbed "The Trophean," it went furiously to work living up to its name.

Within a year after the Russian entry, Eastern Germany and the Soviet sector of Berlin were stripped of artistic and cultural treasures. Immense quantities of renowned museum objects cherished by art lovers the world over — "Old Masters," tapestries, fine libraries, famous collections of statuary, coins and *objets d'art* of all kinds — were moving eastward, often in open boxcars, unwrapped and exposed to the rain. When ordered to remove a bas-relief from one museum, the Russians shaved the wall, harvesting only rubble and dust. They dragged a magnificent Egyptian relief of the Ancient Empire (2500 B.C.) down a stairway, bumping the soft, easily chipped limestone from step to step. A rare Chinese drum of the first century A.D. was likewise bounced

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down the stairs, its bronze frame battered and bent. When exquisite antique furniture would not fit into available boxes, it was chopped up and made to fit. Valuable old prints were hastily ripped from their mats and the corners left pasted on the mats. Beautiful archaic Greek statues of Olympia, the joy of the Kaiser-Friedrich museum, were shipped face down, their classic profiles unprotected.

"They slung fragile, precious things around like sacks of potatoes," one German eyewitness said to me. "It was heartbreaking."

The Trophean was directed by art experts, anthropologists and librarians from Russia. Army officers, however, directed the actual work, and used the first available soldier at hand for labor. These officers witnessed the crude destruction, but were perhaps no more skilled than the soldiers themselves in the handling of art objects. Consequently, Germany's actual losses, plus damage from neglect, ignorance or just plain willful destructiveness, may one day rank Soviet "trophying" among the great instances of cultural despoliation in the history of the Western World.

The story of the Kremlin's looting of German art has trickled out of Germany belatedly. There are several reasons. East Germany — which has been called the Zone of Silence — is

isolated from the West. News comes by subterranean channels, and many people are afraid to talk. One German museum curator, for instance, who still worked in the Soviet part of Berlin, agreed to receive me in his home in the American sector. Learning my purpose, however, he immediately began to complain that he couldn't understand English, and within ten minutes had fled on the excuse of another appointment. An assistant left behind said sadly, "Dr. X can't talk. He has a family and cannot afford to be courageous."

In the second place, German art collections were scattered by the war. Parts had been stored in air-raid depots spotted all over the countryside. Other parts had been left in the museums. Some buildings, hit during military action, were partially or totally destroyed. Then, at the end of hostilities, looting by DP's, German hoodlums and individual soldiers began. When the Russians started carting off stuff by the carload, confusion became supreme. For a long time no one could be sure where anything was.

Today, however, reports have been received from German art experts who are in a position to talk (some have escaped the Soviet zone to tell their story) and from American Monuments and Fine Arts men in Germany; they no longer leave any

doubt that Russia ravaged German art just as completely as it ravaged German industry. And this was very complete: 50 per cent of the Soviet zone's industrial capacity went eastward in the summer of 1945. (Only a fraction is believed to have arrived in usable condition.) In Berlin the Kremlin might as well have been sole occupying power, so far as art is concerned. Berlin's museum collections, among the choicest in Europe, had suffered some decimation from bombing and artillery fire. But they were still largely intact when Russian soldiers arrived. By one means or another, what was left in the city came gradually under Russian control.

II

In what now seems a moment of incredible weakness, the Western Powers played directly into Russian hands by agreeing, in September 1945, to place Berlin's museums under unilateral instead of quadri-partite control. Nearly all the important museum buildings are located in the Soviet sector; notably, the Altes museum, the Neues museum, the Pergamum museum, the Kaiser-Friedrich museum, the National Gallery, the Schlossmuseum and the Zeughaus. Most of these are in that area of the city's center known as "The Museum Island," a mecca for pre-war tourists. Two huge concrete air-raid shelters crammed with treas-

ures evacuated from museums and private collections were also in Russian territory — the Flakturm Friedrichshain and the bunker in the Zoological Garden. The agreement thus placed virtually all of Berlin's art properties under Russian administration.

Long before the agreement, however, Stalin's men had swung into action. They were busily "confiscating" art properties before other Allied troops put foot in the streets of Berlin. To the Germans they said, "We're saving this stuff from the Americans, who would steal it all." Before the Americans had sighted the Reich capital, the Russians had practically emptied the tower in the Zoo. Its contents represented in value about one-fourth of the total property of the Berlin State museums. The prize haul was the world-famous Pergamum Altar, an enormous and beautiful architectural piece some 124 feet long, 113 feet broad and 30 feet high, with a flight of soaring steps. It was brought to Germany in the nineteenth century from its acropolis in Asia Minor, where it was built in the second century B.C. The Pergamum Altar was the pride of the Pergamum museum, which was built in Berlin to house it fitly, and a shrine for all who worshipped architectural beauty. German scholars know that the altar, at least, was handled with the utmost

care. Three German museum curators were ordered to show Russian soldiers how to dismantle and ship it. The Russians toiled away three full weeks on the job, packing the huge and heavy panels safely between thick wooden blocks.

By the time of the Potsdam conference in July, deep inroads had been made on the Potsdam castles which are in Soviet territory on the outskirts of Berlin. To this charming group of buildings — the eighteenth century residence of Prussian kings — the Nazis had evacuated various collections from the Schlossmuseum. The castles' rich furnishings included superb Italian sixteenth century furniture.

Movement about the conference area was highly restricted, and newsmen chafed at the guarded portals. Delegates, it will be recalled, traveled from Berlin to Potsdam along a "corridor." They saw truckloads of furniture coming out of Potsdam as truckloads of guns were carried in. But in those balmy days, Western delegates were overlooking what the Russians were doing to the property at Potsdam, just as they overlooked several other Russian maneuvers at the conference. But a German administrator of the castles, who later escaped to the American Zone, finally protested the roughhouse handling of property. The Russian officer

in charge ordered him to hold his tongue. Not long afterwards the body of a German janitor, who had also spoken his mind, was found dangling from a tree in the Potsdam gardens. His example was pointed out to the administrator. The latter believes today that only an ironclad record against Nazism saved his neck.

Whim alone seems to have determined some of the choices. The Russians carried away the entire Schlossmuseum library and all the Asiatic Indian library. But from other libraries they removed books capriciously and without system. From the State Art library, for instance, they hauled off 56 cases of books of recent acquisition and no great rarity. Copies of the museums' publications, stored in the Pergamum museum cellars, were picked up willy-nilly. They carted off from the Museum of Ethnology around two hundred card-index drawers, but left behind the rest of the file and the collection to which it belonged. They took the entire Phonographic Archive — thousands of recordings of German and foreign music — without the card-index which renders the collection intelligible.

The Prehistoric Department lost all its important pieces, including the precious gold-wrought objects from ancient Troy, known as "The Treasure of Priam," and gold pieces of the eighth century B.C. Eberswalde

Treasure. Such archeologic rarities as the skeletons of *Homo Mousterienses* and *Homo Aurignacensis*, plus finds from many German, Scandinavian, Upper Italian and Southeast European excavations, were also lost. The Department of Antiquities was cleaned out. About 1880 wonderful ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, including such favorites as *The Standing Goddess*, *The Seated Goddess*, and *The Praying Boy*, were taken. Also seized were all the exhibited movable architectural fragments of Greek and Italian origin. Only the lighter, upper portions were removed in some instances, and the massive bases left. The Russians also hauled off about 7000 ancient vases, including the impressive Amphiaras Crater; about 9000 Greek and Roman antique gems; and some 6500 terracottas, among which were the best Tanagra pieces.

The Egyptian Department, particularly rich in prizes, lost many of its magnificent exhibits: the Tomb of Meton, the best reliefs from Abusir and from the Sun Temple in Abu-Gurab; steles [inscribed pillars] of the Middle Kingdom; stone coffins of the Late Period; numerous statues, including the Narm Monkey, and countless other exhibits. Lists of "the missing" are now in the hands of Monuments and Fine Arts men; they could go on almost indefinitely.

III

The most appalling single instance of artistic loss in Berlin, however, was from fire in the Flakturm Friedrichshain, which was blamed by many on Russian carelessness. The Friedrichshain was a treasure trove of splendid old paintings from the Kaiser-Friedrich museum, especially the largest paintings; it contained the museum's great picture frames, which were too unwieldy to move outside Berlin, and some valuable anthropological and ethnological materials, plus property from the Schlossmuseum. When the Russians arrived in Berlin on April 23, this storehouse was intact, but four days after Berlin's capitulation, on the night of May 5, fire broke out on the first floor. German museum men had begged for guards. The Russians had had time to set them up. But adequate protection was not provided.

"Our best guess about what happened," says an American art officer then in Berlin, "is that vandals got in and, finding it dark inside, kindled papers. Straw and packing stuff lying around and the flimsy wooden partitions made it easy to start a fire."

After the disaster, the Germans pleaded again for guards. But a few days later, fire broke out on the second floor and the Soviet authorities in Berlin announced that all the

contents had been destroyed by the two conflagrations. They refused to permit any German exploration and excavation of the ruins for salvageable objects. This raised a commotion among the numerous foreign art experts then in Berlin on restitution missions, who opposed the arbitrary policy. In the midst of the stir, the Russians concluded the whole affair by announcing they had blown up the Friedrichshain.

German scholars believe that some five hundred canvasses of highest artistic value were lost — paintings by Rubens, Van Dyke, Dürer and other old masters. The collection also included around five hundred Italian and German sculptures of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (several of them by Donatello, Rossellino and other masters); a number of gorgeous tapestries; many large and beautiful Italian altar-pieces; the choicest Peruvian and Mexican pre-Columbian objects; dozens of glass paintings from Bavaria and the Tyrol, and countless other highly esteemed museum prizes.

Notwithstanding Russia's dogmatic statement about total destruction, a number of objects known to have been stored in the Friedrichshain have come mysteriously to light. Photographs of some, in the condition in which they survived the fires, are in the files of art experts in the United States. They include 22 Italian and

Dutch sculptures, 12 bronzes, and various pieces of old porcelain and glass. Other Friedrichshain objects popped up in the strangest manner on the Berlin black market, where the Russians have used German "fences" to dispose of confiscated German property.

The *cause celebre* of the Friedrichshain scandal was the "Affair Kamensky." Graf Kamensky, who ran an art shop in the American sector, had the temerity to offer for sale a well-known canvas which belonged to the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum. It had been evacuated to the Friedrichshain and every art scholar assumed it was now in ashes and cinders. Entitled *Saint Augustin, the Donner, and Saint John the Baptist*, it was from the brush of the Flemish painter Albert Bouts (circa 1485). American Military Government seized it and questioned Kamensky, who said significantly that he had gotten it from a high Russian officer. It was confiscated as stolen property.

In the Soviet zone outside Berlin the fate of art properties has been similarly unhappy. The Museum of Dresden has been sacked. Here the Russians selected the best paintings — 1695 masterpieces by Rubens, Claude Lorrain, Raphael, Titian and many comparable artists. They disdained fourth- and fifth-rate for-

eign works and the sentimental nineteenth century German paintings with which der Führer had showered the institution. Among the missing is Raphael's beloved *Sistine Madonna* which now hangs, according to unconfirmed reports, in the new Dresden Room in a museum in Moscow.

From the Dresden Munzekabinet the fine antique gold and silver coin collection was unceremoniously dumped out of display trays into sacks. This was a sacrilege to make scholars shudder, for friction damages the pristine quality of old coins. The Renaissance carvings in boxwood for modeling coins, the old plaster casts and wax impressions—significant documents in numismatic history, but of no particular market value—were abandoned. Catalogues were also left behind and became a water-soaked mass. The coins may already have been melted down or lost completely; if not, scholars would still need years to reassemble the collection as an understandable entity—should they ever get their hands on it again. The Museum of Gotha's contents were also confiscated, as "capitalistic property." They belonged to the estate of the former Duke of Saxon-Coburg-Gotha. The Dresden museum and those in Berlin are state properties. But privately or state-owned, art property of every kind was swept shamelessly into the Soviet maw.

All this time the Western powers occupying Germany were busily working along very different lines—trying to get back to rightful owners, both German and foreign, the mountains of artistic materials that had fallen to their respective administrations. In Western Germany, as in the Eastern zone, this included German-owned museum and private art, as well as the mass of plunder that the Nazi's systematic looting had assembled from conquered countries. Restitution of the plundered and displaced treasures by the West has succeeded on a scale that at first seemed impossible. Authentic German property, held in custody for a sorting-out period, has been handed back to the Germans. Nazi-stolen art, dug out of caves, saltmines and other caches, has gone by trainloads back to the dispossessed countries of Europe—including Russia.

Russian restitution, however, has followed expected channels. Nazi plunder belonging to Soviet satellite countries has been returned. But only token restitutions have gone to countries of the West. And though Communist restitution missions moved freely about Western Germany, missions from Western Europe have never been allowed access to the Soviet area. The German Socialist Unity (Communist) party voiced the Kremlin's point of view about looting

when it said the USSR has every right to help itself to Deutschland art in retaliation for the ruin left by Hitler in Russia. Reich troops did loot along the route to Stalingrad. They picked up as much plunder as they could lay hands on — everything from jewelled icons to an enormous fountain torn out of the streets of Leningrad. Industrial property in the line of march was ripped to pieces. Russia's most beautiful city, Kiev, was heavily damaged.

But Communist looting in Germany seems hardly justifiable simply

because it has been patterned after Nazi conduct — particularly when it is contrasted with the extraordinarily civilized attitude toward conquered art adopted by Russia's allies. Even those who accept Stalin's reparations program on German industry cannot stomach the despoliation of German art. For the unique and permanent tragedy of Soviet ravages is that where lathes and turbines are ultimately replaceable, paintings, rare books and tapestries are not. Maltreated art treasures are hopelessly mutilated or forever lost.

LOVE SONG

BY ELMA DEAN

If never again, in the hours of darkness, your hand
touch me in love, and never
your lips make the magic of words; and if I,
lonely at the morning window, wait for whatever
small sun there may be without you, beloved —
then come as you said: surround me . . . the fear
will be closer than breath. You will not
be the cold one, the lost. Oh, in the new silence,
be near.

Be in the song the bird with the red throat sings
at the time of the green fern's unrolling. Make sure
my fumbling feet on paths where, in lighthearted springs,
today was forever. Oh, make me a sign!
Be sun on my head; be earth; even speech for a stone;
but make it some intimate way I will know —
don't leave me alone.